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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 DAMASCUS 000231

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FOR MEPI COORDINATORS; TUNIS FOR MEPI RO PETER MULREAN
ABU DHABI FOR MEPI RO HANS WECHSEL; RPARIS FOR WALLER;
LONDON FOR TSOU

E.O. 12958: DECL: 10/12/2015

TAGS: ABUD AFIN AMGT ECON KPAO PREL XF KMPI

SUBJECT: HARD TIMES CONTINUE FOR SYRIAN CIVIL SOCIETY; NO
MEPI PROJECTS IN THE WORKS AT PRESENT

REF: STATE 17414

Classified By: Charge d'Affaires Michael Corbin, per 1.4 b,d.

¶1. (C) Summary: Post's MEPI/civil society committee met on March 5 to discuss reftel on MEPI small grants program in Syria. Committee members reviewed the problematic status of the only MEPI project awarded by Post, noting that the project had run into problems because of intense interference by Syrian security services. Although we do not at present know of civil society organizations or individuals that would assume the risks of retaliation by Syrian security services for accepting funding for MEPI small grants projects, we will continue our efforts to identify opportunities as they become possible, perhaps when the intensified SARG paranoia in the run-up to the parliamentary elections and presidential referendum subsides. End Summary.

¶2. (C) Post's MEPI/civil society committee met on March 5 to discuss the possibilities for conducting the MEPI Small Grants Program in Syria. We are pleased that Syria is included in this initiative, although we do not at present know of civil society organizations or individuals that would take on a project of this nature. We will seek out opportunities as they become possible.

¶3. (C) The only MEPI project grant done by Post so far is that for the Dar Emar organization of Ammar AbdulHamid, which was signed by Dr. Samer Ladkani, who had become the Dar Emar representative after AbdulHamid's move to the U.S. (Note: AbdulHamid moved to the U.S. after receiving repeated summons and threats from the Syrian security services for his civil society activities and public criticisms of the regime.) The project was to conduct a conference on the transition to democracy with participants from countries that had made the transition, and to publish the conference papers in Syria. Early in the implementation process, Dr. Ladkani was informed by SARG officials that his project should not be undertaken. He not only heeded this directive, but has severed all ties with Dar Emar, and requested from Post that he be relieved of the funds, either by returning them to the Embassy, or through the appointment of a new implementor, with modifications to the grant as appropriate. Post has explored possibilities, and has recommended one of these to NEA/PI Owen Kirby.

¶4. (C) Since then, Maan AbdulSalam, one of the more talented civil society activists in Damascus, has received a MEPI grant from the Department, after major efforts to create a

means abroad to receive the funds. We have yet to see how the implementation of this project will fare, although we continue to have confidence in AbdulSalam.

¶15. (C) MEPI committee members discussed project ideas ranging from those oriented towards political reform to others promoting aspects of the MEPI pillars, including strengthening the role of women in Syrian society and supporting youth programs. It is not hard to come up with ideas for programs that would promote MEPI objectives in Syria. The problem is finding NGO's willing and capable to implement them in the current repressive environment. Because of long-standing SARG repression, civil society is weak, intimidated, and lacking in basic skills in developing project proposals and management.

¶16. (C) Post continues its contacts with a range of civil society players, ranging from those interested in conventional civil society endeavors to those dedicated to political reform and establishing democracy in Syria. The opportunity to propose projects is periodically broached in these discussions. So far, intensified SARG repression over the past year has kept these players across the spectrum hunkered down. They are not willing to take serious risks for projects that they feel they would not be able to carry out in any case. In particular, they are not willing to accept money from the USG, especially since doing so could -- and in the current environment, probably would -- expose them to capital charges. Perhaps after the elections, SARG paranoia will subside somewhat, opening up possibilities for Embassy use of MEPI money support civil society and to fund small grants projects.

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